

## NEWS BITES

### INTERNATIONAL

#### **Cold-hearted? Blame your donor!**

One in ten transplant patients inherit the personalities of their organ donors, a leading Arizona scientist claims, adding that 'consciousness lives on after death'. Gary Schwartz, a professor of psychology at the University of Arizona, claims he has proof that patients who undergo major organ transplants can inherit the personalities of their donor. He says he has details of 70 cases where this controversial phenomenon has occurred. The theory that personality and character traits can be transferred via an organ transplant has existed for some time, but most scientists have ridiculed the notion.

#### **Cervical cancer vaccine**

A vaccine capable of preventing 80% of cervical cancer cases could be on sale within months. Cervarix was submitted to the European Medicines Agency for licensing in early March by its British Manufacturer GlaxoSmithKline. The company has not set a price yet, but expect to pay around R650 a dose. GSK claims Cervarix would prevent 10% more cancers because it works faster, produces a stronger immune reaction and lasts longer.

#### **Human guinea pigs fight for lives after drug test**

Two men were critically ill in a British hospital and four others were in intensive care, suffering violent reactions to a new drug. The six were taking part in a clinical trial for which they expected to make the 'easy' pound equivalent of R21 400. Police said that they were working with the country's medicine watchdog to establish the circumstances. The American company running the trial said it had operated within industry guidelines. The drug, known as TGN 1412, was being developed for a German company to treat chronic inflammatory conditions and leukaemia. According to one of the human guinea pig's girlfriends, her boyfriend looked like the 'elephant man'. All his internal organs failed. Another man's head and neck had swollen to three times their normal size.

#### **Putting on a fresh face**

Plastic surgeons seem to be so encouraged by the success of the world's first partial facial transplant, that they are looking for suitable candidates to undergo complete facial transplants. According to an article published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, an American doctor, Maria Siemionow, is looking for somebody with a face that was

scarred by burn wounds or trauma. The person must also be functionally inhibited – for example, not be able to close his/her eyes or mouth. Potential candidates must have strong personalities and a support system.

#### **One-hour ivories**

A revolutionary new procedure allows patients to have a full set of dental implants in just 1 hour. The computer-aided technique is so precise that implants can be fitted without even cutting or stitching gums. With no bleeding and virtually no pain, the patient is able to eat immediately afterwards. The hi-tech process is being hailed as a big advance on existing surgical techniques. The secret of the new method, dubbed teeth-in-an-hour, is that it uses computer mapping techniques to produce a 3D image of the patient's mouth. This image is so accurate that it can be used to make a template that can be fitted in the mouth. Once implanted, it guides surgeons to within less than 1 mm of where they need to drill (*Cape Argus* 13 March 2006).

### AFRICA

#### **Meningitis vaccine may be tested in Africa**

A vaccine against meningitis will be tested, and if all goes well it could be available in the next few years in Africa. The Meningitis Vaccine Project (MVP) and the privately owned Serum Institute of India said that phase 1 trials had paved the way for tests in Gambia and Mali later this year. 'If all continues to go as well in testing, the new vaccine could be introduced in Africa within the next 3 - 4 years', according to Dr F Marc LaForce, director of the Seattle-based MVP.

#### **Croc drags US doctor to his death**

The body of an American doctor who was pulled out of a canoe by a crocodile in the Limpopo River in Botswana has been found. Dr Richard Root (68), a professor at the University of Washington Medical School, had been in the country at the invitation of Botswana's Ministry of Health and was working at the Princess Marina Hospital in Gaborone. He had been providing care for patients and teaching interns and medical officers. He was also involved in outreach programmes. Root and his wife had gone canoeing on the river when a 4.5 m crocodile appeared, pulled Root out of the canoe and took him straight under. Jill Jones, programme manager for the University of Pennsylvania, said Root had been keen to help curb HIV/AIDS in the country and 'that he had a lot to offer'.

### Malaria threat as real as ever

South Africans visiting countries like Mozambique are still not sufficiently protecting themselves against malaria. Dr Lucille Blumberg, an epidemiologist of the National Institute for Communicable Diseases, said that almost 1 000 cases of malaria were reported to the Institute in the past month. Those infected were mostly holidaymakers and Mozambicans. Sixteen people died after realising too late that they had malaria.

## SOUTH AFRICA

### More warm bodies coming

In a bid to overcome the crippling staff shortages facing public hospitals, the health department has proposed that within 5 years the annual supply of doctors be doubled and the yearly supply of new professional nurses be upped by 58%, while bumping up the output of pharmacists by 50% in just 4 years. The proposals are in the department's latest draft of its National Human Resources Plan, released early in March by Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang.

The current annual output of doctors is 1 200, nurses 1 896 and pharmacists 400. Targets for specialists, where training output is declining, and therefore aggravating the 'brain drain effect', are still to be set after detailed discussions with provinces, universities and the education department. Treasury is budgeting for an increase of 30 000 people in the total health workforce within 5 years.

### Soccer emergency

The Eastern Cape Health Department is investing R600 million in its emergency services, partly in preparation for

the 2010 soccer World Cup, spokesman Sizwe Kupelo confirmed early in March. He said a substantial influx of foreign visitors was expected for Cup games in Port Elizabeth, while East London and Umtata would be used as training grounds. The Department intended to almost treble its fleet of 400 emergency vehicles in the next 3 years and double its emergency personnel. The main hospitals are also due for a long-awaited facelift, mainly because of the soccer World Cup, *Izindaba* confirmed.

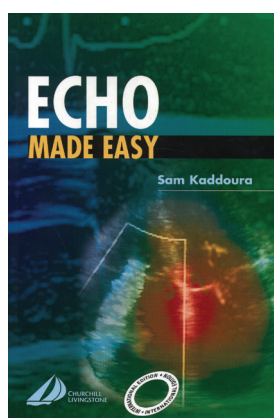
### Merck drops price of HIV drug by 20%

South African AIDS patients will immediately benefit from a cut of about 20% in the cost of the drug Stocrin, pharmaceutical manufacturer Merck announced in early March. Chirfi Guindo, Merck South Africa's chief executive, said the price of Stocrin had been dropped to 'no-profit' status in countries with the lowest ratings on the UN's human development index (HDI). The HDI takes into account issues such as literacy and employment rates and life expectancy.

### Wormy water 'harmless'

The 'worms' found in the tap water of the North West town Swartruggens were the aquatic larvae of tiny flies and were harmless, according to the municipal manager. Jay Tulsee of the Kgatlang River Municipality said samples of the water were analysed and found to contain organisms known as blood worms, the larvae of flies that lay their eggs near bodies of water. Scientists consulted on the matter had speculated that it was possible that flies had laid eggs near the main water supply dam and that they had been 'washed in instead of out' as a result of heavy rain.

Chris Bateman



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